

With its Expanded Mission, OPC Continues Strong Support of District Utility Consumers



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The Office of the People's Counsel (OPC) is pleased to contribute to the Washington Informer's 2019 Sustainability and Energy Supplement in honor of Earth Day. As People's Counsel, I am charged with educating consumers in the District of Columbia about their utility rights, protecting those rights, and advocating to ensure their utility services are safe, reliable, and sustainable and that the rates charged for such service are just, reasonable, and affordable. In the past year, the DC Council passed two important pieces of legislation expanding the scope of OPC's mission: the DC Water Consumer Protection Amendment Act of 2018 and the CleanEnergy DC Omnibus Amendment Act of 2018. These bills highlight the important role that sustainability and clean energy play with respect to the District's environmental goals. OPC welcomes this opportunity to share with readers information about its evolving role in the District's utility consumer advocacy landscape and is excited to continue to represent ratepayers with the new challenges ahead.

Water Consumer Protection Act: Prior to enactment of the new law on April 11, OPC only had authority to advocate on behalf of District consumers in matters pertaining to natural gas,

electricity, and telecommunications services. If a consumer had a concern or complaint about their service from DC Water, the District's sole retail water supplier, OPC did not have the authority to assist them. Because DC Water is a self-regulated entity, when water consumers had issues such as high water bills, increasing water rates, infrastructure repairs, or water-related safety issues, they could only turn to DC Water, the utility providing the service, for a remedy.

With the passage of the Water Consumer Protection Act, that dynamic has changed. OPC's authority has been expanded to bring DC Water ratepayers under OPC's advocacy and education umbrella. While DC Water will remain self-regulated and possess decision-making authority in relation to its rates, OPC will now have the authority to represent DC Water customers with complaints about service, rates and billing. OPC also now has the authority to comment on DC Water rate proposals. Further, OPC will now educate water consumers about their legal rights with respect to services provided by DC Water. Water is a finite resource fundamental to human well-being and an indispensable component of sustainable development in the District. OPC is committed to ensuring that "Water is Life" to all residents.

CleanEnergy Act: The District of Columbia is a trailblazer on setting aggressive goals for climate change and energy related sustainability issues. OPC has historically championed the District's environmental and sustainability policies. We have been incorporating these issues into our case-related policies, our outreach and advocacy efforts for many years. With the enactment of the CleanEnergy Act on March 22, the DC Council has pushed the bar even higher. Among other things, the Act accelerates and increases the District's electric service renewable energy portfolio standard so that 100% of the District's energy will be provided by renewable resources like solar and wind by 2032 and carbon free by 2050. It also increases the Sustainable Energy Trust Fund fee that gas and electric utility ratepayers pay on

their monthly bills.

This law also requires OPC to consider climate change in addition to continuing to consider safety, the economy, the conservation of natural resources, and the preservation of environmental quality in its work. OPC is embracing the expansion of its mission. For example, both Pepco and Washington Gas are presently seeking funding from

its customers for major infrastructure investment projects in the District. OPC has advocated that such projects should only be approved if, and to the extent that, they are needed, sustainable, complementary to the District's environmental policies, and use ratepayer funds efficiently. As the District's energy landscape continues to evolve, OPC remains committed to its core

principles that any new policies and initiatives must support consumers' rights to safe, affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy services; and promote a clean and healthy environment.

For more information about OPC's sustainability and clean energy initiatives, please visit opc-dc.gov and follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. **SS**

Who We Are

The Office of the People's Counsel is an independent agency of the District of Columbia government. By law, it is the advocate for consumers of natural gas, electric, telephone and water services in the District. District of Columbia law designates the Office as a party to all utility-related proceedings before the Public Service Commission. The Office also represents the interests of District ratepayers before federal regulatory agencies. The Office is authorized to investigate the operation and valuation of utility companies independent of any pending proceeding.

The Office's mandate is to advocate the provision of quality utility service and equitable treatment at rates that are just, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory to assist individual consumers in disputes with utility companies about billing or services; and to provide technical assistance and consumer education to lay advocates and community groups.

In addition, in defining its positions while advocating on matters pertaining to the operation of public utility or energy companies, the Office shall consider the public safety, the economy of the District of Columbia, the conservation of natural resources, and the preservation of environmental quality.



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